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The Wreck of the Lady Mary

By Amy Ellis Nutt

Chapter 1: A sudden jolt, then a frigid fight for life

"Only God would separate us," he would tell Jeannette before leaving on a fishing trip, "so you have to trust me."

Riotous waves pummel José Arias. In the frantic scramble to abandon ship, he zipped his survival suit only to his throat and now the freezing Atlantic is seeping in, stealing his body's heat.

The cold hammers him, a fist inside his head.

Seesawing across the ocean, he cannot tell east from west, up from down. At the top of a wave the night sky spins open, then slides away. Buckets of stars spill into the sea.

"Sálvame, por favor. Sálvame."

Save me. Please save me, he prays to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

In the chilly, early morning hours of March 24, 2009, 57-year-old José Arias fights for his life, floating in the water 66 miles from Cape May. The nearest lights are from another fishing vessel, which does not see him, anchored less than a half-mile away. A little farther out, a mammoth container ship steams toward Philadelphia.

Although Arias does not know it yet, all six of his friends and fellow fishermen are dead, and the red-hulled scalloper, the Lady Mary, is resting, right-side up, on the sandy bottom of the Atlantic. The mystery of what sank her, which continues to haunt the maritime world, has just begun.

For months, what happened to the 71-foot Lady Mary baffled the Coast Guard, marine experts, fishermen, divers and heartbroken loved ones — all of whom wanted to know how a sound and stable boat with an experienced crew could disappear from the ocean's surface in a matter of minutes and leave so few clues behind.

This story is about a tragedy no one lived to tell — except Arias, the only crewman plucked from the ocean alive, but who was asleep below decks when the sea suddenly began to swallow the boat. But from the tormented memories of its sole survivor, hundreds of pages of Coast Guard documents, the analyses of more than a dozen marine experts and the Lady Mary's own ghostly remains, a picture has slowly emerged.

No single event doomed the six fishermen, rather a cascade of circumstances set in motion years earlier by a slip in penmanship on a vessel safety form, compounded by a clerical error. Darkness, deteriorating weather, a tired crew and an open hatch contributed to the vessel's vulnerability. Then, a floating behemoth 10 times the size of the little scalloper came plowing through the fishing ground at nearly full throttle.

The men of the Lady Mary were like thousands of others who earn their living from fishing, toiling in a Wild West sort of world, in hazardous, ever-changing conditions with scant safeguards and few legal protections.

On today's oceans, endangered whales have more protection than fishermen, though scores are killed each year.

And when fishermen die at sea, their deaths often remain unexplained, their bodies never found and their lives soon forgotten by the public.

As one mariner said, "There are no skid marks on the ocean."

‘SEE YOU WHEN I GET BACK’

On the morning of Wednesday, March 18, 2009, a week before the Lady Mary disappeared, José Arias lingered on the dock of Cold Spring Fish & Supply in Cape May. Arias, like most commercial fishermen, lived frugally. He shared a spartan one-bedroom apartment in Wildwood with another fisherman and used a bicycle to get around town. A trip to the area known as the Elephant Trunk, the richest scallop grounds on the East Coast, meant he and the other six men aboard the Lady Mary might pocket \$10,000 to \$15,000 each — more for the captain — for a week to 10 days at sea.

The federal government strictly regulates commercial fishing, placing limits on the number of trips and the size of the catch. So at the beginning of each season, usually around March 1, fishermen are eager to get back to work.

Waiting for the rest of the crew to arrive at the dock that Wednesday morning, Arias noticed an 8-foot-long wooden plank leaning against the ice machine, not far from where the scallops are weighed and packed for shipment. Perfect, he thought to himself. He would use the wood to fix one of the bins in the boat's fish hold. Arias picked up the plank and carried it onboard, placing it on the bow, or front, of the ship, next to the life raft.

According to the vessel tracking system operated by the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Lady Mary cast off shortly after 10 a.m. Among the seven men were two brothers, Capt. Royal "Bobo" Smith Jr., 41, and Tim "Timbo" Smith, 39, the only children of 64-year-old Royal "Fuzzy" Smith Sr., who co-owned the boat with son Tim. One of Fuzzy's brothers, Tarzon, (nicknamed Bernie) 59, was also aboard, as was a cousin, Frankie Credle, 56. The other two members of the crew were 23-year-old novice Jorge Ramos and Frank Reyes, 42.

Pointing the boat east, Bobo picked up his cell phone and called Stacy Greene, his 39-year-old girlfriend and the mother of two of his three biological children.

A teller at Crest Savings Bank in Wildwood, Stacy couldn't answer, but she knew Bobo would leave a slew of messages.

"Babe, we're leaving. We're pulling away from the dock," he said after Stacy's voice-mail